

Que(e)rying Antiwork Politics: Queer Identities, Agency, Affect and the Normalcy of Work

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Abstract

People's relationships to paid work are many and varied. For some it is an important indicator of their identity, while for others it is a form of inescapable drudgery, boredom, or a place of exploitation. For those under- and unemployed, this unbearable state of boredom might itself be an aspiration. Current literature on queer identities and work culture is limited by its tendency to focus on discrimination in the workplace, the importance of making workplaces more 'queer-friendly', and questioning why there is a high proportion of gay men and lesbians in particular professions. What this material fails to query is the way work governs everyday reality, and whether queer-friendly capitalism is necessarily a good thing.

Kathi Weeks (2011) employs the term 'antiwork politics' to describe a type of utopic imagining which encourages us to question why paid work monopolises so much time, and the necessity of critiquing policies, practices and ideologies that normalise and privatise work in everyday life. I propose using an antiwork theoretical perspective to analyse a selection of online queer political spaces and interviews with queer and trans workers. I will also consider the ways in which antiwork politics must itself be questioned for its privilege and potential class bias. Considering queer identities, queer theory and antiwork politics together is beneficial for these parties and fields, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation.

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Introduction

Unproductive Queers and their Antiwork Proclivities

‘Queerness often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity. Queers luxuriate while others work. Queers seem always to have time to waste’ (Schoonover 2012:73).

While Karl Schoonover’s point about the relationship between nonproductivity, queerness and failure specifically relates to his study of queer characters and slow cinema, it has nonetheless been an idea asserted popularly in non-cinematic contexts (Rumens 2014:193; Weeks 239-240). For example, political theorist Kathi Weeks draws attention to the stereotype concerning the promiscuous sexual practices of gay men and their hedonistic consumer lifestyles, neither of which are stabilised through reproduction, or the respectability and self-sacrifice associated with family life (Weeks 2011: 239-240). Such stereotypes might seem outdated, particularly given the increasing public support for gay men and lesbians who form family units with children. Yet, as Weeks also notes, the cultural currency of queer non-productivity is sometimes contradicted by claims for ‘marriage equality’ (Weeks 2012:240). For example, on the website *Australian Marriage Equality* (2015), one lesbian couple justify their right to get married on the basis of being ‘hard working tax-paying citizens’. As Willse points out, such claims reveal the conservative tendency to justify marriage equality on the basis of the twinning of the family and work ethic (Willse 2014:547).

In this dissertation I consider queer alignments with political strategies that are more critical of the work ethic and productivist ideologies in general. I find this particularly important within the current climate of deunionization, attacks on public welfare, un- and unemployment, long work hours, and technological redundancy, which effects both queers and non-queers alike.

Weeks uses the term ‘antiwork politics’ to describe ideas and practices that question the taken-for-granted nature of work and the work ethic, and that challenge, ‘the forces that

would naturalize, privatize, individualize, ontologize, and also, thereby, depoliticize it' (2011:7). Antiwork politics is utopian in nature insofar as it is not simply aimed at the reform of the current system of work, but engages a more radical understanding of society where work is not considered so central (Weeks 2011:14-15). Weeks has recently gone so far as to argue that an effect of failing to engage with antiwork politics is that the affects, spaces, temporalities and identities that are not so wedded to waged labour, or that actively challenge it, are not considered legitimate or worthy modes of living (Weeks 2011:8). It is this recognition that spurs me to critique queer variations of the work ethic, which unwittingly devalues identities and practices that it otherwise seems to support.

For Weeks (2011:32), advocating for a basic income and a reduction in the working week without a reduction in pay are two examples of antiwork strategies. To begin with arguments for a basic income, these may take various forms. For example, one model is regular income that is not means-tested. Another is a one-off stakeholder-type grant, which is distributed to individuals by the government to ensure they are able to meet their 'basic' requirements without having to perform paid work (Weeks 2011:138). The basic income was trialled in Mincome, Canada, from 1974-1979 (Bregman 2013), and there are currently proposals to hold a national referendum on it in Switzerland (Opray 2015). While antiwork politics is not delimitable to these two strategies, Weeks, in particular, is interested in their open-endedness as a means of thinking through the cultural consequences of capitalism. In the rest of this introduction I scope out this general area of inquiry as it pertains to queer politics.

My dissertation aims to explore the potential connections between the fields of queer theory, queer politics and antiwork critique. This exploration is structured by three related inquiries. I first identify linkages in the literature between these areas or absence thereof; second, I draw on Weeks' notion of antiwork in order to queer mainstream LGBTQI work-politics; and third, I turn the gaze on antiwork politics itself to analyse the class, gender and other exclusionary dynamics that are at play within the concept.

Failing to critically analyse work culture in relation to queer and trans subjects has various implications. One is the invisibilisation of working life within queer theory (Hennessy 1994:104), an effect here being the limited extent of self-reflection available to queer theorists who are themselves academic labourers. As I demonstrate later, the promotion of queer job attainment as a progressive move for marginalised identities fails to interrogate the

way jobs increasingly fail to provide job stability, economic self-sufficiency, and a sense of purpose (Weeks 2011:75). We can see this in the case of Sophia Swanson on the US show *Underemployed* (2012). As the show's only main lesbian character, Swanson spends the series attempting to negotiate the gap between her current reality of uninteresting labour in a donut shop, and her aspirations to be a writer. Interestingly, unlike her straight twenty-something graduate friends, most of who have more recognisably middle-class work, Swanson is stuck in a state of delayed development performing menial labour. This would indeed tie in with stereotype mentioned earlier about the connections between queerness, time waste and failure. Adopting a more critical and sustained interests in the pitfalls of working life means exploring the radical potential of these linkages in queer relations to work.

Since it is widely acknowledged that work is increasingly without spatial and temporal boundaries, I have limited the focus of my project to paid work. I select paid work since this institution continues to be an important arbiter of one's worth as well as dictating whether one is able to survive economically. Due to the constraints the dissertation, my discussion is mostly limited to a Western context, specifically Australia, New Zealand and North America, from which I draw my second-hand interviews and online material.

It should be acknowledged from the outset that my discussion is chiefly theoretical, although it argues for the importance of employing case study and/or ethnographic methods in this research area. This is not to devalue conceptual work. Referring to the way theoretical analysis focuses on concepts, Elizabeth Grosz states that 'the concept is...the friend of all those seeking radical social change, new events, and new alignments of forces' (Grosz 2012:15). This is because concepts are not bound to the actual, or the matter of everyday reality, but rather exist in the realm of the virtual or what could be (Grosz 2012:15). Given my focus on antiwork politics, a concept which is markedly utopic in nature, I believe theoretical analysis is the best place to start my inquiry.

That said, many of the theoretical concepts I refer to, like transnormativity and cruel optimism (Berlant 2011:1-2), are best grounded in concrete examples. Johnson et al. state that 'critical theory is necessary because the operations of power are not always directly

observable and are often hidden', but the *impact* of this power can often be observed in tangible form (Johnson et al. 2004:91). They recommend that any engagement with abstract theory eventual return to the concrete examples that theory has been abstracted from (Johnson et al. 2004:100). In this sense theorising is characterised by a type of 'double articulation', namely stepping away from the messiness and complexity of individual circumstances to more simple ideas, then stepping back to the specific instances with one's argument strengthened (Johnson et al. 2004:100). For this reason, I draw on examples derived from ethnographic research into labour, since ethnography is a mode that foregrounds the voices of workers, including queer and gender diverse workers. The main texts I draw on here include *Queer Sex Work* (2015), *Steel Closets* (2014), a book about queer and trans steelworkers in the US, and *Sexual Orientation at Work* (2014). I am also mindful that theoretical analysis, with its aim of accounting for the complexity of particular cultural phenomenon, can end up leaving out the groups affected by the research (Johnson et al. 2004:90).

This is an ethical concern I face in my own work. Specifically, since the interviews I draw from appear in published research, I am twice removed from those human sources and thus impeded in my interpretation of their experiences. Given the time and course load limitations of my masters, I was unable to conduct ethnographic research myself, though it remains my ambition in future study. In any further research I would conduct interviews myself and seek feedback from the participants prior to publishing. In this dissertation however, I am restricted to the use of published accounts of work culture and material taken from Facebook groups. It is my intention to post my findings on the respective online spaces I discuss throughout the dissertation.

I use the term 'queer' throughout this dissertation as an adjective and analytic tool, as well as a descriptor for workers who are queer-identifying. As Rosemary Hennessy (1994:104) puts it, "“queer” is more than a refusal or a resignification of the law. It is also a ruthless interruption of the often less visible relations of labor that dominant as well as counterhegemonic sex-gender identities are involved in'. Further, Antke Engel (2012:69) states that the critique of heteronormativity encompasses a deconstruction of the enduring force of norms more generally, not just in relation to sexuality. This opens up a space for

considering the queerness of antiwork imaginative projects, which aim to denaturalise everyday experiences of paid work.

Given that the second-hand interviews drawn on in my work span a range of queer and trans identities, with incommensurable experiences of marginalisation, I believe it is important to acknowledge the directionality of queering. Jin Haritaworn (2008) states that, rather than queering downwards, researchers and writers should aim to ‘work upwards and horizontally, situationally and paradoxically’ in relation to trans subjectivity (Haritaworn 2008). Jay Prosser points to the implications of queering trans subjects from above:

One wonders to what extent this queer inclusiveness of transgender and transsexuality is an inclusiveness *for* queer rather than for the trans subject: the mechanism by which queer can sustain its very queerness - prolong the queerness of the moment - by periodically adding subjects who appear ever queerer precisely by virtue of their marginality in relation to queer. (in Haritaworn 2008)

Here, Prosser indicates the importance of avoiding a disembodied and power-evasive mode of critique (in Haritaworn 2008). He also points to the way in which difference can be collapsed within the term queer, throwing into question the emancipatory potential of a ‘queer grammar’ which assumes a homogenous experience of marginalisation (Prosser in Haritaworn 2008). Prosser problematises attempts to indiscriminantly claim to queer all types of social phenomena (like work) and difference (for example, differently classed and raced working identities), without positioning oneself in the process (Haritaworn 2008). Furthermore, Haritaworn (2008) states that queer critique can only operate ethically if one recognises their own positionality, where they are trying to end up, and who they are attempting to include in the journey.

Being a queer-identifying worker myself, I am situated within my field of research and in relation to these ethical terms. I acknowledge that forms of privilege, such as being white and university-educated, influence my experience of work and its critique in conscious and pre-conscious ways (Alcoff 2001:271). While my writing is theoretical in nature, its focus on mainstream queer politics means it is not limited to the theoretical perspective but tries to engage ethnographic methods. However many of the conversations I have had about antiwork

politics and queerness in the course of this project have been with friends who are also university-educated. It is only through drawing on interviews and online material that feature the voices of differently positioned queer and trans workers that I can address my limited perspective. The interviews I draw upon in my work feature predominantly trans, lesbian, queer and gay workers.

In the literature review that comprises the first chapter of this dissertation, I examine texts on antiwork politics and consider them in relation to the field of queer theory. I identify the lack of critical material available on the relationship between queer identities and work culture. My discussion proceeds with an analysis of the concept of work, including the way work and non-work time have become increasingly imbricated. I then examine the characteristics of antiwork politics, including its oppositional characterisation and relationship to post-work society. I then discuss why the literature on queer theory and antiwork politics have not yet intersected in significant ways and highlight some of the issues associated with this.

My second chapter queries why antiwork materials (posts, videos, articles) are not shared or discussed on specific online queer political spaces. I touch on Jan Verwoert's (2013) notion of 'setting the stage' and Lauren Berlant's (2011:18) concept of 'lateral agency'. I then explore the notions of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011:1-2), homonormativity (Duggan 2003), and transnormativity to help explain the reasons why people involved in online queer spaces, and by extension queer workers, might not engage in obvious acts of protest against the institution of work.

In my final chapter I address some of the tensions identified in my second chapter, namely those arising from reading Weeks and Berlant together. A primary issue raised in this chapter is how lateral agency sits alongside antiwork practices and its utopic ideals.

Chapter 1

Addressing Queer-Antiwork Connections

What is ‘work’?

While the literature on work is too vast to summarise, much can be traced back to Marx. For Marx (1904: 49), labour is something whose value is concealed by capitalism through a process of mystification. Labour is objectified in the commodity form, and through the process of commodification, workers are alienated from the product of their labour (Lukacs 1971:87). The mystification process means that measuring the quantity and value of work is difficult and, moreover, troubles the capacity to identify what labour actually *is*. As more recent work by Zatz and Borris (2014:95) has shown, what is considered ‘work’ and who is considered a ‘worker’ has various material implications. These include the distribution of workers’ rights, the social status accorded work, and whether or not it is considered acceptable to pay workers very little or not at all (Zatz and Borris 2014:95).

In particular, the term ‘work’ has been critiqued for failing to represent particular marginalised groups like sex workers. Virgie Tovar states:

I’m reminded of a workshop I gave once about the ‘politics of werq’ing’. ‘Werq’, in my interpretation, is a purposeful queering of the spelling and meaning of ‘work’, sometimes part of drag or ball scene parlance. In this workshop I ask participants to interrogate the differences between ‘werq’ and work, and re-imagine werq as queer labor[*sic*] that has been de-legitimized/criminalized through racist heteropatriarchal labor discourse/law (Tovar et al. 2015:48).

Tovar uses the neologism ‘werq’ to describe a type of double movement which highlights the unacknowledged labour involved in the construction of queer identities (Tovar et al. 2015:49). The term draws attention to the fact that what counts as labour is socio-historically

constructed, and is influenced by race, class and, *inter alia*, gender biases (Tovar et al. 2015:48; Zatz and Boris 2014:101). For example, ‘hustle skills’ (which can include, but are not limited to, sex work) are one way in which people of colour from lower class backgrounds have employed particular techniques to sustain themselves, but which do not qualify as ‘work’ in accordance with dominant understandings of labour (Tovar et al. 2015:48). Tovar’s modification of the term ‘work’ demonstrates the way it is not neutral but rather conceals an array of racial, cultural and other norms.

As Weeks argues, assuming paid work is simply an oppressive force that needs to be overcome fails to recognise the productive element of labour and its capacity to support marginalised identities (Weeks 2011:29). Weeks states, ‘work is not only a site of exploitation, domination, and antagonism, but also where we might find power to create alternatives on the basis of subordinated knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and emergent models of organization’ (Weeks 2011:29). Anne Balay’s (2014) ethnographic studies on queer and trans steelworkers are one significant example of an attempt to capture the perspective Weeks is referring to. In her interviews with twenty lesbian-identified steelworkers, Anne Balay highlights the way steelwork facilitates the expression of female masculinity amongst her interview participants. One interviewee stated, ‘putting on the uniform, especially the steel-toed boots, shaped the way I talked, the way I walked, the way I felt’ (Balay 2014:92). Balay says that while the job was dirty, caused some of the women health issues, presented inconvenient work hours and the threat of layoffs, some of the women she interviewed loved their work because it provided avenues to construct and manifest their identities. One butch woman commented that she felt more accepted in the workplace than she did at home or in the wider community (Balay 2014:94). Unlike with other menial jobs in the service industry, the women were able to keep their hair short, wear slacks, and exhibit ‘masculine’ personality traits (including physical contact and aggressiveness) at work (Balay 2014:97). Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam, Balay (2014:79) uses her interviews with butch steelworkers primarily to highlight the way that, ‘masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and does not properly express male heterosexuality’. However, the results of her research also demonstrate the more general point that labour can facilitate non-normative identities. Although paid employment is indeed a disciplinary apparatus, the author draws attention to the way waged labour is creative as well as oppressive in its identity effects. Although Foucault has taught us

to recognise that power often works as a productive rather than repressive force, it is nonetheless imperative to pay attention to the specific emergence of marginalised identities in the vicinity of labour.

That people invest in labour in manifold and often contradictory ways is not a new idea. Weeks, for instance, argues that the incapacity of the work ethic to live up to the meanings, virtues or promises it makes in relation to employment, provides the ammunition for its undoing (Weeks 2011:76-77). In David Graeber's article on 'bullshit jobs', work is exposed as a highly moralised and political institution, rather than an economic requirement. Graeber points to the proliferation of 'pointless' jobs as a strategy through which the 'ruling class' can keep the population busy, tired, and therefore less likely to radicalise against pro-work ideologies (in Glaser 2014). For Graeber, examples of 'bullshit' positions are those in the administrative sector, including the creation of industries such as financial services and telemarketing, and the jobs created to service these areas, like clerical, technological and security assistance (Graeber 2013). Bullshit labour further encompasses the ancillary positions associated with these aforementioned jobs, like all-night delivery drivers and cleaning work. Although individuals are encouraged culturally to fetishise work, jobs are no longer for life, necessarily meaningful or can achieve their subjectifying aspirations. As Glaser (2014) puts it, 'neoliberalism simultaneously overinvests work with meaning and drains it of meaning'. What is so unsettling and potentially radical about bullshit jobs is they make work appear 'inauthentic', trouble the uncritical acceptance of productivist ideals amongst many in the left, and encourage the left to question work as an institution in itself (Glaser 2014). Thus it is important to pay attention to not only the durability and dominance of the work ethic, but also the ways in which it is unstable and susceptible to challenge (Weeks 2011:31).

Work as a form of biopolitical regulation

Resisting the neoliberal prowork mandate is difficult given the biopolitical and ubiquitous nature of work. Biopower can be used to define instances in which everyday capacities and immaterial labour outside of work, better described as, bios or 'life itself', are now sites of interest for neoliberal objectives (Fleming 2014:875). Indeed, Fleming (2014:894) states, 'formal neoliberal employment arrangements- based upon competitive individualism,

predatory private property relations, precarious work, commercialization and so forth- cannot reproduce themselves on simply their own terms'. 'Biocracy' has been employed to define instances where one's work is governed through biopower, and where 'non-work' hours are shaped to suit productivist inclinations (Fleming 2014:875). Fleming relates an extreme instance of this in one computer programmer's retelling of the way he cracked codes during his sleep- a phenomenon he called 'sleep working' (Lucas 2010 in Fleming 2014:881). Melissa Gregg provides another example in her study of media and IT workers, where she finds that some employees are so bound to their jobs that one continued working while immobilised in the emergency department of his hospital after a major accident (Gregg in Fleming 2014:889). What Fleming and Gregg's examples demonstrate is the way that work permeates off-the-clock hours in a way that is not experienced as oppression or the forfeiture of free time by knowledge workers in particular. Indeed, Stephen Shukaitis (2014:13) states, 'it might seem that in times of biopolitical production, where the policing function of work is thus the policing function across all of life, the refusal of work is the refusal of life itself'. What Shukaitis gestures towards is the complexity of projects aimed at social recomposition which assume that work has an identifiable form, and is alienable from other aspects of everyday reality. Recognising the biopolitical nature of work is relevant to a consideration of how antiwork politics can claim to be against particular work practices and ideas.

The Oppositional Nature of Antiwork Politics

Sara Ahmed's (2015) discussion of what it means for feminism to be 'against' patriarchal culture assists with understanding what it might mean to be 'against' work, or the unquestioned acceptance of work society. This is particularly the case where work is considered ubiquitous and, as highlighted with regards to the mystification of labour, not an entirely knowable 'object' of study. Ahmed discusses the difficulty in defining what feminism stands in opposition to, given that gender and sexism pervade every aspect of life. This certainly resonates with the notion of work as a type of biopolitical regulation, which is not limited to set hours. Ahmed points out that feminists will define the 'object' they are against differently, depending on their history and subject position (for example, the gender binary, sexism, or the patriarchy). Likewise, one's subjective experiences will influence the work-related object they are against, such as housework, white-collar work, or work for the dole. Ahmed says that being in opposition to a particular object depends not just on

differential perceptions of what one is against, but also whether one feels that, given this perception, they have the capacity to take some mode of action. This point is indeed of relevance to antiwork politics, in the sense that, given work is a means of sustenance for many people, it might not be possible for them engage in particular forms of resistance, like taking extended toilet breaks or sabotaging work projects.

The incapacity of feminism and antiwork politics to secure an ‘object’ they oppose does not indicate their failure as political movements. Ahmed (2015) states that, ‘anger against objects or events, directed against this or that, moves feminism into a bigger critique of what is, as a critique that loses an object, and hence opens itself up to forms of possibility that cannot be simply located in what is’. She claims feminism is not an unsuccessful project because of the loss of the object, but rather that this failure indicates its dynamism, durability as a movement, and the fact that it, ‘stands for something which is not yet articulable’ (Ahmed 2015). I would argue that antiwork politics losing the ‘object’ of work through, *inter alia*, a recognition of the elusiveness of labour, does not make it a failed venture either. Rather, I would argue that this perceived failure points to the processual rather than static nature of antiwork politics, and the fact that its utopian inclinations make its scope and aims not entirely knowable in the present.

Antiwork politics as a utopian demand

Amber Hollibaugh, executive director of the now defunct New York organisation *Queers for Economic Justice*, argues for the need for an economic justice movement that pays attention the material realities of queer lives under capitalism. Specifically, Hollibaugh calls for a movement that, ‘queers the reality of Walmart line jobs, sex work and homeless shelters’ (in Drucker 2015: 356). Hollibaugh insists on the need for an antiwork politics that provides some critical distance from the current reality of working life, while not being completely divorced from those realities- including the reality of unemployment, the grey economy for unskilled work, and jobs like sex work, which continue to go unrecognised as labour.

Weeks argues that antiwork politics can be conceptualised as a utopian demand. This is because it challenges liberal ideologies which promote the idea that the only realistic or appropriate political course to take in relation to labour is piecemeal reform (Weeks

2011:177). Understanding antiwork strategies as utopian recognises that they are part of an ongoing project and a provocation to think differently, rather than about pursuing fixed solutions characterised by ideological closure. Weeks draws on Ernest Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopias (in Weeks 2011:195-196). Abstract utopias are a type of wishful thinking. They are compensatory in nature, influenced by bourgeois interests, do not pay enough attention to current realities, and are inattentive to historical processes. By contrast, concrete utopias are anticipatory, recognise the way utopic futures are interwoven with current realities (a type of 'educated hope'), and effect transformation. In Weeks' account, antiwork politics can be understood as a type of concrete utopianism. She states, 'a Utopian demand should be capable of producing an estrangement effect and substantial change, while also registering a credible call with immediate appeal; it must be both strange and familiar, grounded in the present and gesturing toward the future' (Weeks 2011:221). A basic income may not bring an end to the capitalist wage system, for example, but could change the privileged status and experience of work in everyday life (Weeks 2011:220). Seeking to disconnect the ingrained association between employment and income is an example of a political change that can go beyond individual reform (Weeks 2011:221). Antiwork critique involves disputing the stigma associated with utopian thinking and, as stated, recognising the importance of open-endedness to antiwork strategising.

Post-work society

Post-work society is term used to describe a point in the future where work is less central to everyday life, and opting not to work is considered a more legitimate way of living. Theorists have discussed the possibilities of Western postindustrial societies becoming 'post-work' as a result of new technologies and automation replacing people in the workplace (Aronowitz et al. 1998:38). Andre Gorz (1999: 77) says this has not eventuated, as the gains of technological improvement have disproportionately benefited corporations and certain members of the professional and entrepreneurial classes. He states the effect on the majority of workers has been job instability, wage reductions and job loss as a result of technological redundancy. Writing in a less academic context, journalist Peter Frase (2012) states, 'when it comes to perpetuating the work-based society, the ideological power of the work ethic is at least as important as the technical possibilities of production'. By this he means that the failure of post-work alternatives to be considered viable has less to do with their practical

impossibility in particular locations, and more to do with capitalist-driven attempts to perpetuate ideas about full time work being compulsory, moral and necessary to meet basic needs. The result is that antiwork demands, such as a shorter working week with no reduction in pay, are considered unrealistic due to a binary framework in which increased pay and working hours are set against shorter hours and lower remuneration (Aronowitz et al. 1998: 60). The incapacity of technological innovation to bring about an increase in non-work time highlights the role of work as a disciplinary apparatus that keeps labourers in their place, and encourages the unquestioned acceptance of work without end as virtuous and inevitable.

Queer theory and antiwork politics

The lack of engagement with antiwork analysis is evident in a wealth of literature focusing on non-normative sexualities and work culture. For example, Lewis (2010) and Eribon (2004) question why queer workers are more likely to enter particular professions over others; Browne (2014) examines the way increasing the number of queer employees can be a financial benefit to business; and a number of writers focus on discrimination against queer people in the workplace (Jacobsen and Zeller 2007; McNaught 1993). Literature on working-class gay and lesbian experience has also been questioned in terms of its invisibilisation of working life (Frank 2014:12).

Likewise there is little queer theoretical analysis which critically engages with life on the job. However, there have been some recent developments in this area. Queer theory has been critiqued both for its erasure of labour politics (Hennessy 1994:104), and class dynamics (Hennessy 2000:54; Johnson 2001:127). As mentioned in my introduction, work by Karl Schoonover (2012) has mined the subversive possibilities of ‘queer’ characters in slow film, though this regards filmic representation more than actual lived experience. The anthology *Queer Sex Work* (Laing et al. 2015) does feature some pieces which employ a critical labour perspective and queer theory analysis, and thus provides further avenues for the development of the interdisciplinary area.

Heather Berg (2015:23) highlights the productive potential of combining a queer theory and critical labour perspective in her analysis of queer porn. Her piece in the aforementioned anthology provides a more nuanced reading of sex work to the Marxist feminist critique

provided by Kathi Weeks. With regards to this topic, Weeks (2011:66-67) argues that claims for inclusion within the institution of paid work by sex workers involves augmenting the scope of productivist ideologies and failing to critique the institution of work itself. She says these attempts demonstrate the way waged work has become so naturalised that the perception is that work is an inevitable social necessity that can be reformed but never abolished (Weeks 2011:7). Berg's view challenges this idea, for example by highlighting the the queer potential of 'inauthentic' sex acts and 'gay for pay' porn (Berg 2015:23). Her work also draws attention to the way 'real sex' is used as a means of regulating queer desires and accumulating profit. Thus, Berg has concerns with some queer feminist porn, which uses the authenticity of queer female identities, sex acts and practices (such as orgasm), as a marketing tool for consumers and justification for higher sales prices. She states, 'from a critical labour perspective, we can see management and consumers' perceived entitlement to workers' 'authentic' selves as symptomatic of the process by which late capitalism demands access to every part of workers' time, bodies and affects' (Berg 2015:27). The fact that this work requests a linear connection between one's sexual orientation and job performance demonstrates the way that even the sexual activities and orientations of sex workers outside work hours are considered governable by capital (Berg 2015:27).

One issue with queer feminist porn producers advertising that they simply exhibit performers' 'true' sexual identities, is that sexual orientation and queer sex are depicted as unskilled modes of non-work, or a 'labour of love' (Berg 2015:26-28). Referring to her experiences with feminist porn, Bella Vendetta states, 'if the term feminist porn is being used, I can almost guarantee that it means I will be offered an incredibly low rate. To me, it is not empowering to accept half my rate [because Feminist porn] is a labor of love' (Berg 2015:28). This type of work can thus be understood in relation to the exploitative but currently popular 'do what you love' mantra (Tokumitsu 2014). The aphorism is used to justify things like unpaid internships and uncompensated guest lectures at universities. The mantra does this through naturalising the idea that these forms of labour are modes of non-work, geared more towards the passion, self-betterment, and fulfilment of the labourer, rather than being about money. Berg highlights the capacity of 'gay for pay' scenes to queer this capitalist strategy. She claims 'gay for pay' porn draws attention to the way sex and sexuality are a constructed, laboured performances. Her point thus critiques the view of Weeks, who states that moves to recognise sex work as work simply perpetuate productivist ideologies

and augments the scope of work culture. Berg's analysis highlights the importance of applying a queer theory analysis to work culture and antiwork critique. Her reading of queer porn is of particular relevance to queer people, as it points to the way sexuality itself can be a type of labour, and exposes some of the negative effects of queer feminist porn producers claiming the right to 'know' the sexual identities of their workers (one potential impact being the non-recognition of sexual fluidity).

As this introductory overview demonstrates the fields of queer theory, critical labour studies and antiwork politics need to be brought together in order to identify the dominant role of work, productivist ideologies in everyday life and their queer corollaries.

Chapter 2

What Counts as Queer and Trans Politics?

Sitting at a summit that catered to LGBTQI university students and recent graduates a couple of years ago, I was struck by the unquestioned worth attached to a university degree and the assumption that we would all find ‘meaningful’ work post-study. The entire day was spent creating a ‘feel good’ atmosphere for participants, with motivational stories from speakers who worked in ‘queer-friendly’ workplaces, a message from a former high court judge claiming there were ‘no boundaries’ left for LGBTQI people in attaining work, and a ‘wall of inspiration’, where we were encouraged to write messages assuring other ‘young queer leaders’ of their limitless potential to be professionals and business-leaders.

Being an underemployed graduate and struggling to pay my rent at the time, I was sceptical of a number of the messages being promulgated. In the context of the summit, I seemed a Grinch who insisted on my dissatisfaction with job options, had little sense of what I wanted to ‘do’, and no drive to become a ‘leader’ in the queer community. I just wanted a job. The effects of un- or underemployment on queer and trans people (as well as the shame and despondency that is sometimes associated with joblessness) were ignored. The implied underside of the upbeat message was that these were not ‘queer’ issues. According to the speakers, the only concerns facing young LGBTQI people in their working lives were possible discrimination in the workplace or not being out and proud about their sexual identity. In this company, it seemed as if my problem was simply having a bad attitude to work.

Two years later, I bring critical thinking to an area often captured by motivational impulses and objectives. My desire in writing this chapter is thus to examine spaces which deal with the issues of queerness, work, and/or antiwork politics, to see the productive potential in reading them together. In order to do this, I will examine two queer online spaces as well as one virtual space dedicated to advancing antiwork ideas and practices.

Group Descriptions and Content

NZCTU Out at Work is a Facebook page (Community) established to share information and promote the aims of the NZ Council of Trade Union's network for, 'lesbian, gay, takataapui, bisexual, intersex, transgender and fa'afafine union members' (NZCTU Out at Work n.d.). The page promotes 'equality' in the workplace for DSG (diverse sexuality and gender) employees, mainly through the promotion of union membership, being able to be open about one's identity at work, and establishing a friendly working environment for DSG individuals.

Against Equality is a public Facebook group that maintains a digital archive critiquing the 'holy trinity' of gay assimilationist politics, namely 'marriage equality', the prison industrial complex (PIC),¹ and queer and trans inclusion in the military (Against Equality n.d.). Although the extent of the collective's engagement with antiwork politics is limited, it does take issue with the unquestioned acceptance of prowork culture in relation to the push for trans integration in the military (Against Equality 2015). For example, one video shared by a group member features an interview with Cate McGregor (Figure 1), an openly trans woman discussing her positive experiences and acceptance in the Australian Army, and as a cricket broadcaster (Against Equality 2015). The video depicts her story as a positive advancement for trans visibility and acceptance. In response to the video however, the poster provides the comment: 'a military machine is still a military machine' (Against Equality 2015).

¹ The prison industrial complex (PIC) refers to the intersection of a number of interests, including that of government, prison companies and other institutions which police and monitor individuals (Critical Resistance n.d.). The PIC describes the increasing privatisation of punitive systems of control (for example, companies like Serco running immigration detention centres). It does not just include the physical structures of prisons, but also the carceral logics that circulate in everyday life, and ideologies which promote the idea that the 'cause' of crime lies with the individual, rather than larger social and economic inequalities.



Figure 1 (Against Equality 2015a)

1,000,000 Strong Against Work is a Facebook page that features comics, articles, quotations and Youtube clips relating to antiwork themes. A notable absence on the page is any recognition of the way work culture and antiwork politics are experienced differently for queer and trans people (or indeed a number of other minority groups). The page shares material that promotes individual acts of opposition to work through absenteeism, laziness, taking sick days and unemployment. For example, one post promoting absenteeism features a picture of scene from *Office Space* (Figure 2), where one character (Peter) unashamedly agrees with another (Bob) that he has not been at work because it does not appeal to him. Another post shared on the page features a picture of a person lying in bed with the caption, 'I didn't go to work today ... I don't think I'll go tomorrow. Let's take control of our lives and live for pleasure not pain' (I Didn't Go to Work Today 2012). In relation to opting for leisure while being paid to work, another post from the page features a comic with a male figure lying under the tree. A female figure approaches and reprimands the man for being lazy. In response to her assertion that he should get a job, the man responds, 'why?' (You're so Lazy 2015). Taking sick days is also promoted on the page, with a picture shared of a poster stuck to a public noticeboard encouraging viewers to 'call in sick' (Call In Sick 2014). Another post (Figure 3) features graffiti in a railway tunnel encouraging people to, 'throw away your brilliant career and start a living!' (Throw Away Your Brilliant Career 2013). The page also includes material that endorses the benefits of collective action amongst employees. Among the posts there is a link to an article concerning a strike in a Nike and Adidas plant in

Vietnam (1,000,000 Strong Against Work 2015). Some of these posts operate ironically, and either overlook or acknowledge the fact that not all workers will be able to engage in the individual acts of protest they describe. Having said this though, I do think there is support demonstrated for individual oppositional acts within the workplace and in ‘non-work’ time through sharing this type of material.

 **1,000,000 Strong Against Work** added a new photo.
December 11, 2013 · 🌐



Like · Comment · Share

 **1,000,000 Strong Against Work** added a new photo.
August 15, 2013 · 🌐



Like · Comment · Share

👍 264 people like this.

Figure 2 (1, 000,000 Strong Against Work 2013)

Figure 3 (Throw Away Your Brilliant Career 2013)

While none of the groups deal with the connections between antiwork politics and queer and trans identities in an explicit way, examining them together facilitates an understanding of these links. For example, using an antiwork perspective to examine the content shared on *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out At Work* draws attention to the tendency to not critique the normalcy of work in many queer online spaces. This is the case even with groups that aim to create more humane conditions for queer subjects in the workplace, and try to open up opportunities for greater choice in relation to the kinds of jobs available (by encouraging more viable options to military service).

Those Who Set the Stage

One issue with the material shared on *1, 000 000 Strong Against Work* is the way it sets a standard for antiwork activism that can only be achieved by a privileged section of the population, for example in relation to quitting your job, laziness and unemployment.

An unstated assumption is that the viewer will be employed to begin with. Another problem is the way it speaks to a particular classed and gendered subject, who is able to forgo work and income, has the luxury of ‘slacking off’ in the workplace, and/or is unburdened by domestic work within the home.

In interrogating why queer online spaces like *NZCTU Out at Work* and *Against Equality* do not share material with antiwork themes, or promote practices with antiwork aims, it is important to question who ‘sets the stage’ in relation to antiwork activism. Jan Verwoert’s (in Vrasti 2013a) notion of ‘setting the stage’ can be used to draw attention to the forms of invisible labour required to bring scenes of activism into being. One of the ways to explain the concept is in relation to the female ‘host’ at a dinner party, whose ‘off stage’ labour (affective, domestic and otherwise) is expected, yet unrecognised in relation to the labour of her male counterpart, whose ‘on stage’ performance at the party is visible, legitimate and acknowledged (Jan Verwoert 2013). These two positions are characterised by different temporal schemas, in that the visible labour of the male host is finite (for example, he gets to go to bed at the end of the party), yet the domestic and emotional labour of the female host is never-ending. If queer online spaces were to take up the ideas promoted on *1,000,000 Strong Against Work*, questioning who ‘sets the stage’ in relation to antiwork activism would be important, given the potential for this inequitable chronopolitical relationship. I draw on

cultural studies theorist Sarah Sharma's use of the term 'chronopolitics' - meaning a politics of time- in my use of the term 'chronopolitical' (Sharma 2014a: 6).

Verwoert's concept can be thought through in relation to anti-capitalist activism and the Occupy protests. Examining it in this context helps highlight the pitfalls of potential antiwork practices and activism where the people who occupy the stage of protest take precedence over workers who help to bring these scenes into existence. Cultural theorist Sarah Sharma relays scenes she witnessed in DC and NYC in April 2012, where occupiers slept on the sidewalks as a means of challenging the spatial regimes of financial capitalism. What is noticeable about her descriptions is the way that, whilst the Occupiers slept at 5.30am, an array of labourers were at work behind the scenes, including cab drivers, subwayworkers, drycleaners, and sidewalk cleaners, all of whom were implicitly setting the scene for these performances of activism (Sharma 2014:11). One of the issues here for Vorwoert would be the way the individual and collective labour of these workers would never be considered an 'event' in itself, but instead would be classified as that which prepares the scene for the 'event' (the activism of the Occupiers) to occur. Sharma (2014:12) makes the case for disrupting dominant the temporal infrastructure by rendering the night labour visible, for example by having night workers show up during the day instead. However, I would argue this simple inversion of the on stage/off stage binary does present possible material concerns for workers who are not willing to risk their jobs for the Occupy cause. Her suggestion is also a dilemma in the sense that those who are expected to take responsibility for creating a rupture in the dominant temporal fabric are also those who have the most inequitable relationships to time to begin with.

Questioning who 'sets the stage' for anti-capitalist organising is relevant to the question of why online queer spaces, such as *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out At Work*, have not taken to promoting material and activism with antiwork aims. This is because Vorwoert's thesis cautions against the perpetuation of scenes (of activism, in this case) where offstage labour is repetitively effaced for the sake of the dramatic visibility of those resisting capitalist normativity. His work emphasises the need to look to the sides of the stage to see the way antiwork activism is a collaborative rather than an individual endeavour. Thus, the type of material shared on *1,000 000 Strong Against Work*, which celebrates individual acts of subversion through absenteeism, laziness and taking sick days, should not be a blueprint for

the antiwork ideas and practices that could be promoted by queer online spaces. Nor should queer online spaces celebrate modes of refusal which ignore the labour of social reproduction and the fact that the ‘outside’ of labour for one group (laziness, absenteeism, Occupation) might be the realm of gendered and capitalist exploitation for another (housework, unrecognised night labour).

Lateral Agency

Lauren Berlant’s concept of ‘lateral agency’ provides a critical framework for understanding the relationship between agency and antiwork politics, and might help explain the minimal engagement with antiwork material on *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out at Work*.

‘Lateral agency’ does not presuppose active intention on the part of the subject, is not centred around a sovereign individual who partakes in cognitive decision-making, and does not describe a situation wherein individuals partake in courageous acts that seek to challenge the capitalist status quo (Berlant 2011:18). Instead, lateral agency is exemplified through things like exhaustion, the wearing down of the subject, and eating food to get by (Berlant 2011:100). Kathleen Stewart’s conception of agency is similar- she states, ‘agency can be strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive, or exhausted. Not the way we like to think about it. Not usually a simple projection towards a future’ (Stewart 2007:87). In his interviews with 23 trans-identifying un- and underemployed women, political scientist Dan Irving recounts a common moment that arises during the interview process (Irving 2015: 51). As the women relay their incapacity to find secure work after their transition, they fall silent. Irving (2015: 51) says it was as if, ‘their experiences of precarity extended beyond the bounds of articulation’². This silence is eventful and significant for a number of reasons, including the way it shines the light on corporeal histories of repetitive job rejections (a wearing down

² The application of the term ‘precarity’ to particular types of work is contested. Precarity can have different meanings depending on the geographic context (Puar 2012:163). A popular definition is that it applies to workers who experience job insecurity and are expected to be flexible to meet their employer’s demands and international pressures (Vij 2013:122). Specifically, it reflects ‘a general turn to vulnerability under conditions of Post-Fordist neoliberalism’ (Vij 2013:122). However, the increasing generalisation of precarity to cover an array of differently situated workers, from factory employees to middle-class academics, has been disputed. Laura Fantone (in Sharma 2014: 9) claims that precarity became a buzzword, ‘at the moment when the Western male worker began feeling the negative effects of the new post-industrial flexible job market’. It has also been asserted that precarity did not simply arise from the aforementioned market reforms, but that, ‘women and other social groups have long been precarious without recognition’ (Gill and Pratt in Sharma 2014: 9).

of the subject), and because it implicitly calls into question ‘common sense’ discourses that link the capacity of individuals to secure employment with personal responsibility and merit, and un(der)employment with individual failure. Thinking about antiwork politics and workers’ lives in relation to a framework of lateral agency is productive, as it helps to conceptualise things like exhaustion and wariness as types of political performance and embodied critique, rather than simply a mark of subjects caught up in the perpetuation of a capitalist wage system (Gorfinkel 2012:318). It also means that the politics being espoused by an antiwork framework are not severed from the everyday working conditions of many queer and trans employees.

Cruelly optimistic relations

The way in which cruel optimism governs workers’ injurious adherence to working life would certainly be one of the reasons for the minimal engagement with antiwork critique on *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out at Work*. Lauren Berlant describes cruel optimism as an affective relation in which individuals become attached to an object of desire, better described as a ‘cluster of promises’ associated with the object, that they expect it will render possible for them (Berlant 2011:24). This relationship is paradoxical in the sense that the object ends up standing in the way of their flourishing. Cruel optimism encourages an engagement with, ‘the built and affective infrastructure of the ordinary’ (Berlant 2011:49). Thus, the concept is of particular significance in understanding workers’ attachment to institutions like paid work, whose normative status in everyday life goes unquestioned.

Berlant’s concept is productive for thinking through the question of why there is no explicit engagement with antiwork ideas on *NZCTU Out at Work* and *Against Equality*. This is because it allows for an examination of the ways in which workers do not behave like Melville’s Bartleby; a character who responds to the prospect of work through the repetitive speech act, ‘I prefer not to’ (Berlant 2011:28). Instead, resisting work in the manner of Bartleby, the worker governed through the relationship of cruel optimism paradoxically maintains their involvement in, and commitment to, working conditions and structures that are deleterious to them.

Anne Balay's interviews with queer steel workers help illustrate the way survival and the assurance of paid employment takes precedence over questioning the domination of work in the everyday. Many of the steelworkers Balay interviews note the failure of work to make good on the promises they expect from a job, including health insurance (Balay 2014:133-134), safe working conditions and some sense of intellectual engagement (Balay 2015: 22). She also identifies the 'slow death' they experience in the course of their employment, as a result of things like cancer (attributable to the dust and chemicals), heart trouble, and the limited life expectancy related to the stress of the job and alcoholism (Balay 2014: 124). Despite this impact on their health, workers remained wedded to their jobs. This allegiance to work is only in part due to the need for economic survival. Significantly in the case of the butch steel workers Balay interviews, work also provided a sense of community, self-importance and acceptance (many of the butch women reported that their queer identities were not accepted in other areas of life) (Balay 2014: 129-130).

Although the experience of the employment relationship for the steelworkers might be considered cruelly optimistic, for others this would be an aspiration (Berlant 2011:5), since as Michael Denning (2010:79) puts it, 'under capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited'. Indeed, Balay notes the lack of alternate well-paying jobs in Gary, Indiana, the small town in which the steel mills were taking on less labour, and machines were increasingly taking over human work (Balay 2014: 26,28). The worker's attachment to the job also related to the aspiration of kinship normativity. Indeed, a source of pride for some interviewees was the fact that they worked in essentially the same place and performed the same duties as their grandfathers did.

Berlant (2011:10) argues that the present economic climate of late capitalism should be understood through the framework of 'crisis ordinariness'. This involves a shift away from the climactic and exceptionalist understandings of trauma, towards recognising the way crisis has become normalised in everyday life (Berlant 2011:10). Balay states that one of the ways the queer workers dealt with the stress of work (and for many male interviewees, homophobia on the job), was through drinking. Indeed, she notes the way the bars outside the plant opened at 7am (Balay 2014:126). The interviews make clear that there is also a heightened lore of risk-taking among many steelworkers, due to shorter life spans and the dangerous nature of their labour (Balay 2014: 29). One of Balay's interviewees stated that,

although his partner died of lung cancer, he found it immaterial to his health whether or not her smoked, given the amount of airborne chemicals he inhaled at work every day (Balay 2014:30). Thus in the context of the steel mill, ‘crisis’ is not considered extraordinary, but is rather something normalised within daily working conditions, and something the workers constantly adjust to.

The framework of lateral agency is helpful for understanding why queer workers would be less likely to engage in action or support ideologies which explicitly challenge work as an institution. I would argue that this tendency in everyday working culture is no doubt also a contributing reason why there is little material in queer online spaces, like *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out At Work*, which evidences antiwork critique.

A Homonormative Agenda

The focus on claims for inclusion in current systems of work on *NZCTU Out at Work* highlights the function homonormativity plays in relation to queer workers failing to question the role of work in everyday life. Lisa Duggan (2003:50) describes homonormativity as, ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’. The identity-based politics perpetuated by homonormativity do not criticise class inequality, but rather operate to naturalise capitalism (Duggan 2003:79). Given this, Duggan describes ‘complacency’ as, ‘the affect of homonormativity’ (Duggan and Muñoz 2009:280). This goes some way to explaining why antiwork ideas, policies and practices have not been entertained by the gay mainstream. Duggan says that homonormative agendas tend to involve a focus on liberal reform strategies, such as claims for anti-discrimination legislation, the decriminalisation of same-sex relations (Duggan 2003:53), and ‘marriage equality’ (Duggan 2003:50). Such reforms promote the false idea that the benefits of legislative change, which generally serve the interests of the middle-class, white gay population, will eventually ‘trickle down’ to the most marginalised in the gay community. Posts shared on *NZCTU Out at Work* exhibit a number of these false beliefs. Rather than contest capitalist work conditions, the page features posts about a queer recruitment drive for *McDonalds* (NZCTU Out at Work 2013), and the ‘Rainbow tick’ program being employed in NZ (Figure 5; NZCTU Out at

Work 2014), which is a certification initiative where workplaces are given a ‘tick of approval’ for workplace ‘diversity’. It also shares posts supporting an anti-discrimination and human rights rights-based framework for queer employees in NZ and abroad (NZCTU Out at Work 2014a; NZCTU Out at Work 2014b).



Figure 5 (NZCTU Out at Work 2014)

What is problematic about online spaces, like *NZCTU Out at Work*, failing to query neoliberal discourses on diversity in the workplace, is the way the positive treatment of some queer workers is used to detract attention from the subordination of other labouring bodies within and outside national boundaries. Indeed, Drucker criticises the way ‘queer-friendly’ capitalism detracts attention from the poor treatment of workers in non-US locations (Drucker 2015:233). He highlights the fact that the brand *Levi’s* boasts gay-friendly policies through its establishment of a lesbian and gay worker’s association, and via granting health benefits to the partners of gay and lesbian workers. However, this situation exists alongside employees being subjected to sweatshop conditions in Saipan, and queer and non-queer workers in Texas being laid-off as the company moves its work to the Caribbean. He also draws attention to the way companies like *IKEA* target gay and lesbian couples as a consumer market, yet reduce the benefits and pay of queer and non-queer employees by relocating production to lower-paying areas, and hiring undocumented workers. Such a tactic reflects Lisa Duggan’s (2003:71) description of homonormativity as characterised by a,

‘neoliberal “equality” politics- a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of “equality” designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century’. As demonstrated by Drucker’s example, this version of ‘equality’ is both abstracted from material realities and class politics, and perpetuates global inequality (Duggan 2003:xxi). The effect of online queer spaces like *NZCTU Out at Work* sharing material which uncritically promotes ‘diversity’ rhetoric in the workplace is that it risks perpetuating these power dynamics, and ignores the way inclusion in work as an institution relies on the subordination of particular labouring bodies over others.

Transnormativity and the Construction of Working Bodies

Like homonormativity, I would argue that transnormativity is another reason for the limited extent to which online queer spaces like *NZCTU out at Work* and *Against Equality* engage with a critique of work culture. The term ‘transnormative’ describes the way normative articulations of trans identities are mainstreamed for the sake of acceptance by broader society, and thus shares many of the characteristics of homonormativity (including recapitulation to capitalist structures, and a reliance on liberal reform tactics).

Transnormativity maintains the hierarchies of queer citizenship, in that it is characterised by a disinclination to interrogate the way class, race, nationalism, gender essentialism and ‘respectability’ politics render some trans bodies socially acceptable and others not so.

The historical relationship between trans embodiment, medical discourse and the economy would no doubt be a factor influencing the tendency to not share material which questions the institution of work on *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out at Work*. Dan Irving (2013:22) traces the historical development of trans subjectivity and productivist ideologies in relation to the ‘transsexual working body’ in North America around the 1950’s. He states that one function of the ‘real life test’ applicable to those seeking sex change surgery has historically been geared towards securing their incorporation into employment and middle-class society. For example, during the post-World War 2 period the capacity of male bodies to be industrious was considered a sign of ‘authentic masculinity’ (Irving 2013:20). Further, ‘the willingness of many transsexuals to demonstrate their masculinity through an avid participation in the labour market trumped their nonnormative, nonreproductive embodiment of masculinity’ (Irving 2013:20). Here, gendered subjectivity, agency, autonomy, and capitalist exploitation

become enmeshed, demonstrating the complexity of attempts to delineate prowork ideologies from the constitution of trans subjects.

Another historical discourse which contextualises the current relationship between trans people and work around the same period as that stated above was promoted by medical practitioners like David O. Cauldwell, who conceptualised transsexuality as something which rendered trans subjects pathological and unproductive, because of the way they were obsessed with their gender identity (Irving 2013:21). The narrative advanced by Cauldwell was this made trans individuals unproductive and/or unemployable, and thus dependent on others financially (Irving 2013: 21). Indeed, with regards to one of his patients, Earl, Cauldwell stated that, ‘by now we were beginning to learn something from the real Earl. We knew that her [*sic*] ambitions were to live parasitically. *She [sic] would not work*’ (qtd. in Irving 2013:21).

The normative way in which trans identity and the work ethic have historically been entangled and continue to function together helps explain why queer online spaces like *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out At Work* fail to question the current neoliberal agenda behind trans inclusion relating to employment. It provides a background for the current state of affairs wherein the inclusion of trans workers is considered a progressive means of diversity-building. One issue with this is way the way in which a workplace depicting itself as ‘trans friendly’ may obscure the fact that it still has issues with sexism, racism or, *inter alia*, ageism (Rumens 2014:191). Another is demonstrated in relation to the Diversity Council of Australia, a non-profit employment diversity advisor, who makes a ‘business case’ for the inclusion of transgender employees (Diversity Council Australia 2015). They claim it mitigates the chance of lawsuits, promotes company branding and corporate reputation, and enables businesses to reap the benefits of the ‘pink dollar’ (Diversity Council Australia 2015). Journalist Vanessa Sheridan (2013) comments on the case of ‘Cedar’, an employee at *Zoro Tools*, an industrial supply company in the US. She states ‘Cedar is now able to bring her authentic self to work every day, resulting in a happier, healthier, and more productive employee for Zoro Tools, as it’s been proven that authentic individuals are higher-performing employees’ (Sheridan 2013). These examples beg the question of whether rendering trans bodies productive, self-sufficient and hard-working within a heteropatriarchal capitalist society is a progressive response to their previously outlined historic invisibility and

pathologisation (Irving 2013:27). It is arguable that this goes against calls by Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (2013:7), 'to nurture a transgender political economy that moves beyond a rights-and-representation based framework'. Additionally, one of the issues with rendering trans subjects 'respectable' through the employment relation is that it results in the further 'othering' of individuals (trans or otherwise) who cannot or will not find work, are on welfare, or are economically disadvantaged (Irving 2013:27).

As I indicated earlier in the chapter, the way in which *Against Equality* critiques trans inclusion in the military does help shine light on the way trans incorporation into systems of waged work can be violent and instrumentalist. However, it does not go further and query trans participation in types of employment not considered ideologically suspect by the collective. It is arguable this is not within its stated aims (*Against Equality* n.d.). However, I would say that by not interrogating this issue, spaces like *Against Equality* and *NZCTU Out at Work* miss the opportunity to unpack the ways trans identities are constructed in and through the employment relationship (Weeks 2011: 8-9), and the way their intelligibility and acceptance as subjects is bound up with the hegemonic system of capitalism that spaces like *Against Equality* claim to query.

Concluding remarks

Instead of pursuing an upbeat agenda that assumes either the value of work or the value of resisting work, this chapter has tracked new insights into the queer and trans work experience, highlighting the way lateral agency and the historical and current pressures to (re)create normative queer and trans subjects often discourages individuals from consciously agitating against conditions that might be adverse to them. Specifically, this line of thinking asks us to reconsider pre-conceived understandings of agency and recognise the importance of paying attention to previously overlooked 'weak' (Ngai 2005: 27) feelings like exhaustion and its relationship to political change.

Chapter 3

Antiwork Politics, but for Whom? An Exploration of Affect, Queerness and Class

Reading Berlant and Weeks together makes us mindful of the way one person's antiwork utopia might not be sustainable for those who are not able to acquire work, never mind relinquishing it. Indeed, the fact that one must first have work before being able to withdraw from it can be seen as a type of class privilege. In the process of applying a queer theory analysis to sexual labour, Heather Berg recognises that while some sex workers consider the labour they perform (BDSM, porn or other erotic performance) to be a process of queering labour and sex, others might experience sex work as a site of exploitation (Berg 2015:23). This highlights the issue of projecting ideological conceptions of work onto labourers who may have a completely different perception of their experience.

The fact that not working might not be an option for some people raises the question of how the strategy of 'getting by' at work sits in relation to antiwork utopias. It is worth asking at what point an act, idea or form of non-action, goes from being part of the perpetuation of everyday work culture to a productive form of resistance and, furthermore, who gets to determine this distinction. Wanda Vradi (2013a) asks what it would be like to promote a feminist politics 'from below' in relation to the refusal of work. 'Instead of remaining trapped between two ideal positions of submission and inaction', she writes, 'it would recognize that all forms of action and inaction are already indebted and dedicated to someone else's labor' (Vradi 2013). This reflects a similar point that was raised in chapter two, regarding the relationality of labour and Jan Verwoert's concept of 'setting the stage'. However, I believe it is productive to raise it again to see how this plays out in relation to a worker's first-hand account of this awareness. Vradi's point is highlighted in Dean Spade's recount of being at a conference which covered issues such as how to negotiate a work-life balance and racial concerns about lower pay. In this context, the issue of cleaning labour came up:

Someone brought up how they ‘clean before the cleaning lady comes.’ It was the moment the room came together and erupted - people audibly agreeing and laughing ... My response was different. I started cleaning other people’s houses around age nine and cleaned offices and houses throughout my childhood with my mom and sister. I got my first cleaning job without my mom when I was eleven and worked cleaning and painting vacant low-quality rental apartments during the summer between sixth and seventh grade (Spade 2010:75).

Spade’s account highlights his own identification with invisible labour. His recognition does not just come from a ‘feminist perspective from below’, however, but also from the moment of disorientation he experiences in the presence of his academic peers. Sara Ahmed describes disorientation as a queer moment that conveys the possibility of observing the world in a ‘slantwise’ manner (Ahmed 2006:65). She likens the experience to entering a known space with a blindfold on (Ahmed 2006:7). In this familiar space, one has a sedimented history of being able to extend oneself and thus is able to reach outwards towards particular objects. The fact that these objects are familiar allows an individual to detect the way they are facing, meaning they are able to reorientate themselves. In the case of a space that is strange, the objects one reaches towards may not allow one to attain their bearings (Ahmed 2006:7). Thus, the unfamiliarity with the object will make one unsure of which way to turn. Spade initially experiences a high level of comfort in the conference environment, which he describes positively as feminist, queer-friendly and geared towards racial justice matters (Spade 2010:75). This experience of orientation is disrupted, however, when the ‘joke’ about cleaning for the cleaning staff is made. Spade states elsewhere that in his experience of being a trans-identified law professor, he has been advised by mentors and other academics not to rock the boat in academic environments with his views on feminism and critical trans politics (Spade 2010:76). This history of institutional disorientation no doubt impacts Spade’s incapacity to reorientate himself within his environment, where if he spoke up he might be depicted as the cause of the problem, rather than simply the person pointing the matter out (Ahmed 2010:65).

Ahmed states that seeing the world ‘slantwise’ results in objects one was not previously aware of entering the field of vision (Ahmed 2006:107) and presenting, ‘the hope of new directions’ (Ahmed 2006:158). These ‘new directions’ are not always positive (Ahmed

2006:158). However, in Spade's case seeing slantwise bolsters his awareness of class disparities and gender concerns among a racially diverse section of the academy. It leaves enough of an impact on him to write about it and make others aware of the issue. Discussing Spade's experience highlights that when engaging with antiwork politics, the question should not simply be about which kind of acts produce modes of resistance, but also acknowledging the importance of drawing on a 'feminist perspective from below' and moments of disorientation to reflect on the way one is always indebted to another's labour. The issue of how to ethically respond to this indebtedness then arises. In answer to this, Wanda Vradi suggests that 'to act' 'is also to care or to be grateful' (Vradi 2013a). While Vradi does not flesh out her conception of agency when making this statement, her claim does suggest a wider social obligation to constantly consider these interpersonal links, and consider what the ethical mode of recognition might be.

In examining the way one person's antiwork utopia might not benefit another, I do not presume that notions of hope and change lie solely with self-declared antiwork advocates, nor that those who can only survive in the present are completely devoid of hope. I would argue that both Berlant and Weeks are hopeful in their texts. Berlant is more hopeful about survival in the present (Berlant 2011:4), whereas Weeks' hope is more future-orientated, as evidenced in her interest in advocacy for the basic income and shorter working week (Weeks 2011:32). An example of Berlant's understanding of hope is demonstrated in her analysis of the Dardenne brothers film *Rosetta* (1999). Within the film the young female protagonist's aspirations are not for a fantastical 'good life', but simply involves hope for an existence where she does not 'fall between the cracks' (Berlant 2011: 180). This may mean a factory job, uninteresting work or another type of low-paid labour (Berlant 2011:163-164). In an interview where she discusses the concept of cruel optimism, Berlant (2013) states that modes of resistance are always present alongside disappointing attachments to normative desires, within which we can include the desire for work. For Berlant, part of the way to intervene in the present is through the 'pluralization of objects' and fantasies, along with the development of better ones, in order to enable the possibility of 'less cruel-optimistic relations' (Berlant 2013). I would suggest that this 'pluralization of objects' could encompass more stable jobs, the basic income, and shorter working week. In a study of non-employed Americans, it was found that women spent more of their time performing housework and caring for children than did their unemployed male counterparts (Katz 2015). Given the way

gendered norms govern spaces and time outside of paid work too, it is easy to see the way in which a shorter working week might not necessarily equate to a reduction in domestic labour for women (indeed, it could result in an increase in it). Thus, women's relation to the shorter working week could become one of cruel optimism too. This example demonstrates that important not to create a strict dichotomy between survival in the present and the future, as it ignores that hope and 'negative' affects could potentially be present in both realms.

In considering antiwork utopias one must recognise that survival in the present is necessary for there to be a future, and this survival will sometimes depend on workers' complicity with capitalism (Crosby et al. 2011:132; A Public Dialogue 2014). As Vraști states, a 'politics of refusal that lacks a social basis for struggle or any relation to material conditions cannot effect lasting social change' (Vraști 2013a). Responding to Weeks' criticism that sex work, like other forms of labour, perpetuates the work ethic, Chris Willse (2014:549) points out that depathologising this mode of work provides a stand from which other demands might be made, such as OHS protections for sex workers. Indeed, in the face of issues like criminalisation and discrimination, queer sex workers Cassandra Avenatti and Eliza Jones (2015:91) emphasise the significance of skill sharing as a type of survival technique. They state this includes sharing, 'advice on screening and safety, practical tips of the trade, training in particular skills, [and] commiserating about less-than-perfect clients' (Avenatti and Jones 2015:91). Weeks' oversight here speaks to her lack of engagement with queer and sex worker concerns, and underscores that antiwork utopian projects must be kept concrete so that already marginalised workers are not further marginalised by being excluded from participation.

Concentrating too heavily on the creation of post-work alternatives runs the risk of brushing over 'bad' affects sometimes associated with current unemployment, like depression. A number of personal and interview-based accounts of unemployed queer and trans people highlight the political nature of depression. One example of this would be the impact of transphobia on trans people not being able to attain work (McDermott 2014; Irving 2015; Afiomai 2014). As Ann Cvetkovich (2012:13) puts it, 'depression is another manifestation of forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for destruction, whether through incarceration, war, poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless'. Cvetkovich argues that developing an

understanding of depression beyond the medical model helps deconstruct the public/private binary between emotionality and employment (or in this case, an incapacity to attain work) (Cvetkovich 2007:464). This enables an examination of the way depression can be an affective descriptor for the way people experience neoliberalism (Cvetkovich 2012:11). In a small-scale study of lesbians and trans women in the UK (both working- and middle-class), Elizabeth McDermott (2014:92) draws attention to these points. One of her interviewees, Laura, states, 'there's times I do get a bit depressed; I feel like I'm stuck in my life' (McDermott 2014:97). Paying attention to this experience of being 'stuck' (2012:23) shows how the strange temporality of the impasse has potential to open up a reflection on the inadequacy of current economic circumstances. Indeed, Laura takes issue with her lack of job options, at one point feeling pressured to apply for work on chat lines (something she did not feel comfortable with), because there was nothing else available (McDermott 2014:97).

McDermott's interviews also highlight the way joblessness, depression, class and sexuality interact (McDermott 2012:88). She finds that unemployment takes on a different valence for lesbian women in her study. For some lesbians, like Stacey and Alison, work is a means through which they are able to be independent, take on a 'breadwinner' role for their family, and live without the need for male support (McDermott 2014:94). The role of class in the interviews is very stark. Middle-class PhD graduate Naomi has been unemployed for a year following her studies, but is holding out for professional work (McDermott 2014:98). She is able to do this as she is financially supported by her parents. In McDermott's study, the notion that work should be intellectually fulfilling is exposed as a form of middle-class privilege. As one of the working-class interviewees Mary states, 'it's a means to an end, my job is; it's certainly not something that I enjoy' (McDermott 2014:95). We can surmise from these responses that antiwork utopic ideals like the shorter working week would probably have a different meaning for Naomi and Mary, demonstrating the unmarked classed nature of these objectives.

Although Weeks (2011:12) does examine the enduring nature of the work ethic when it comes to people being tethered to employment, McDermott's interviews offer a more complex perspective on peoples' affective investment in work. Projecting a state of false consciousness onto unemployed working-class women who aspire to boring and unenjoyable work and are depressed when this is not achieved, is not helpful. It also goes against Berlant's

(2013) aim of not shaming people for being invested in ‘objects’ which might be injurious to them. In Laura’s case, for instance, she felt pressured to apply for work she was not comfortable with given her economic circumstances (McDermott 2012:97).

As these examples show, examining the relationship between ‘bad’ affects like depression and unemployment means taking seriously the social abjection associated with joblessness (Tyler 2013:201). Cvetkovich (2007:467) states that the aim in creating utopias should be to, ‘offer a vision of hope and possibility that doesn’t foreclose despair and exhaustion’. In relation to her own personal experience of depression, Cvetkovich notes that, ‘saying that capitalism ... is the problem does not help me get up in the morning’ (Cvetkovich 2012:15). This highlights the need for antiwork projects to pay attention to things like depression and its potential to highlight the inadequacy of the here and now.

The question of which lives will be emancipated through utopian ideas like the basic income is an important one. In terms of the models Weeks (2011:138-139) discusses, there is little critique as to how developed countries might have amassed the capacity to provide a basic income to their citizens in the first place, including through exploitative international relationships and procuring surplus value from workers within their own boundaries. Although the form the basic income should take is disputed (Weeks 2011:138), I would say that the notion of a standardised income across the board, as Weeks sets out, is problematic, in the sense that it does not account for the unequal social positions of individuals- for example, based on racial histories of dispossession and marginalisation.

In critiquing the concepts of the basic income and shorter working week, I am wary about letting my own and others’ affective responses to the exploitation of workers globally and internationally be an end point in itself. In the course of writing this dissertation, I have had numerous conversations with others who take issue with the concept of the basic income and shorter working week, on the basis that it will not benefit some of the most marginalised workers (or non-workers) locally and abroad. However, these conversations do not seem to progress beyond pointing out this criticism. In this context it is interesting to recall Berlant’s discussion of the way that media coverage of sweatshops locally and abroad is often fetishized in the media, for example, because it produces, ‘*feeling* and with it something at least akin to *consciousness* that can lead to *action*’ (Berlant 1999:49). She states the

presumption at play is that attempting to identify with the pain of others will result in larger cultural change (Berlant 1999:53). At issue here is ‘sentimental citizenship’, where citizens of more privileged countries locate the suffering ‘elsewhere’ within national boundaries or internationally (Berlant 1999:51), detracting attention from the way exploitation often lies beneath the surface of everyday commodities, and the fact that many forms of harm, because of their banality, do not even register as exploitation (Berlant 1999:50). Berlant claims that the sentimental recognition of exploitation through sensationalist media should not obscure the fact that more attention needs to be paid to the local and everyday nature of suffering (Berlant 1999:84).

The tension created between Weeks’ utopic inclinations and Berlant’s identification of the drudgery of the everyday is not completely irresolvable. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, by reading them together, and examining the way a phenomenon like depression can create a productive gap between everyday expectations and unmet desires, elements of hope are revealed within seemingly hopeless situations. As the examples in this chapter indicate, antiwork impulses can be at play in scenarios where at a casual glance workers or non-workers appear to be simply capitulating to the capitalist status quo.

There are numerous future areas for research in relation to my topic. What is notable about Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and the Weeks (2011) text, is that neither use ethnographic research to investigate the ways lateral agency and antiwork politics are experienced by workers themselves. Thus, similar to some of the issues with my methodology, these concepts are not fleshed out or tested in relation to workers, leaving questions about their groundedness in actual working life. This is one future area of research.

In her book *In the Meantime*, Sara Sharma (2014a) uses a mixed methodological approach (including ethnographic research) to study the way taxi drivers, frequent flyers, and yoga instructors are differently situated in relation to time. As outlined in my second and third chapters, queer and trans un- and underemployed people often experience a different relationship to time, a heightened awareness of which is elicited by things like exhaustion and depression. It would thus be interesting to examine these experiences by drawing on Sharma’s theoretical insights and her work on chronopolitics. This could occur through an ethnographic, case study or mixed methodological approach.

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